The Last Word: Structure and voice in “As It Was in the Beginning”

NBE3U, Unit 3: Writing Back, Lesson 5. 75 minutes. Teacher lesson plan.

Lesson at a glance

Johnson's 1899 story begins and ends with the same words, spoken about Esther and then by her. Between them, a mission school takes her language and her dress, and the missionary who raised her calls her “uncertain blood.” The frame gives Esther the last word: the story is hers to tell, even about the terrible thing she does.

What students do: Students prepare carefully for a story that ends in a killing, learn where the title comes from, map the story's structure, compare its opening and closing lines, analyse how the frame shapes meaning and voice, and plan an analytical paragraph about structure.

Curriculum expectations

Code	Students will…
C1.6	analyse texts, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, in terms of the information, themes, ideas, and issues they explore in relation to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, explaining with increasing insight how various aspects of the texts contribute to the presentation or development of these elements
C2.3	identify a variety of elements of style in texts from First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, and, as appropriate, in relevant texts from non-Indigenous sources, and explain, with increasing insight, how they help communicate meaning or reflect a world view and enhance the effectiveness of the text
A3.1	demonstrate an understanding of the challenges First Nations, Métis, and Inuit individuals and communities face and have faced in controlling their own narratives and resisting colonialist views, as revealed in text forms studied in this course

From The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 to 12: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies (2019), English: Understanding Contemporary First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Voices, Grade 11, University Preparation (NBE3U). A = First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Perspectives and Text Forms in Canada, B = Oral Communication, C = Reading and Literature Studies, D = Writing, E = Media Studies.

Learning goals and success criteria

Learning goals	Success criteria
• We are learning to analyse how a story's structure develops its ideas. • We are learning how a narrator takes control of her own story.	• I can explain the title's source and irony. • I can map the story's structure. • I can compare the opening and closing lines. • I can explain how the frame gives Esther control of the narrative.

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Materials and preparation

- **Slides:** The Last Word deck.
- **Handouts:** Structure Map (page 1), Frame Paragraph Planner (page 2).
- **Reader:** “As It Was in the Beginning.”

Lesson sequence

Time (min)	Part	Teacher	Students	Look for
0–8	**Care**	Before we read.	Listen.	
8–35	**Read**	The story.	Read.	
35–50	**Structure**	Map and title.	Map.	Structure mapped.
50–62	**The frame**	Opening vs closing.	Compare.	Frame explained.
62–75	**Paragraph**	Plan.	Plan.	

Differentiation

- **Support:** Section summaries; teacher read-aloud of the final scenes.
- **ELL:** Glossary: mission, matron, factor, benediction, pagan.
- **Challenge:** Compare Esther's frame with Christie's ending in Lesson 4.

Assessment

Type	Tool	Purpose
Assessment for learning	Structure Map and paragraph plan	Development of ideas (C1.6), style (C2.3) and narrative control (A3.1)

The last word: key points

- **Title:** From the Gloria Patri: “as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be.” The prejudice never changes.
- **Structure:** Childhood; the mission school; love; the overheard conversation; the act; the return home.
- **The frame:** Opens: “They account for it by the fact that I am a Redskin, but I am something else, too—I am a woman.” Closes with the same idea split into two lines.
- **Voice:** Esther narrates from after the events; she refuses the explanation others give for her.
- **Narrative control:** Johnson lets the Cree girl the mission tried to remake tell the whole story, including what the mission did.
- **Not an excuse:** The story makes the act understandable without making it right; readers must hold both.

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Teacher notes

- Before reading, name the content (boarding and residential schools, separation from family, loss) and remind students they may step out, pass, or talk privately. This course discusses colonization, residential schools and their effects. Some students and families carry this history personally. Support: Hope for Wellness Help Line (for Indigenous people across Canada, 24/7, by phone or online chat at hopeforwellness.ca; English and French, with Cree, Ojibway and Inuktut on request at certain times), 1-855-242-3310; Kids Help Phone, 1-800-668-6868 or text 686868; 9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline (call or text 988); National Indian Residential School Crisis Line, 1-866-925-4419.
- The story was first published in 1899 and collected in The Moccasin Maker (1913). Its narrator, Esther, is a fictional Cree girl taken to a mission school; it ends with her poisoning the man she loves after overhearing the missionary's racist plan. Do not dwell on the method; focus on structure, voice and why Johnson gives Esther the last word.
- The title comes from the Gloria Patri, a Christian prayer of praise (“as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be”). The irony: the mission promised a new beginning, but the prejudice was there from the start.
- Father Paul's speech uses slurs and calls Esther “a caged animal.” Historical texts use the words of their time, including terms now considered offensive (for example, “Red-skin,” “savage,” “squaw,” “half-breed,” “Eskimo”). We quote accurately when analysing, explain why these terms are harmful, and use today's terms (First Nations, Métis, Inuit, Indigenous, or the specific Nation) in our own words. Readers may say “[skip]” instead of reading a slur aloud.
- We strongly recommend reviewing this unit with your board's Indigenous education lead and, where possible, inviting a First Nations, Métis or Inuit Elder, Knowledge Keeper or guest speaker following your board's protocols (including offerings and honoraria). Local Nations' own sources come first.

Coming up

Lesson 6, Big Red Apples.

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